Visiting the Floating World: Tracing a Cultural History of Games Through Japan and America

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to establish a framework for better understanding the relationships between Japanese and American games in relation to that industry, visual styles, and cultural influence. To do that, this paper draws on a larger cultural history of Japan and America, and critiques and questions current and potential uses the concept of Orientalism in relation to digital games. In doing so, my hope is that we can arrive at a more sophisticated, nuanced understanding of that relationship, and use this framework for subsequent critical analysis.

Author Keywords

Japan, art, culture, Orientalism, hybridity

STUDYING JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE

"Sweeter than soy sauce, sourer than plum wine" is the tag line for the July 2004 EGM International section (in *Electronic Gaming Monthly)*, profiling two Japanese games that never made it to Western shelves. A regular column in *Edge* magazine discusses "Something about Japan." The October 2002 issue of *PSM* magazine noted the "Clearly cooler" translucent version of the PS2 available in Japan, "but you may still be able to find one for yourself at larger import game shops or online." And in *Wired*, there is the perennial trend-spotting "Japanese school girl watch." Japanese games, consoles, technology and fashions are an integral part of the global games industry in ways both explicit and implicit.

The goal of this paper is to establish a framework for better understanding the relationships between Japanese and American games in relation to that industry, visual styles, and cultural influence.* To do that, this paper draws on a larger cultural history of Japan and America, and critiques and questions current and potential uses of the concept of Orientalism in relation to digital games. In doing so, my hope is that we can arrive at a more sophisticated, nuanced understanding of that relationship, and use this framework for subsequent critical analysis.

Unlike more traditional forms of popular culture in the West such as film and television, the digital games industry has historical and cultural roots as well as strong business interests in areas outside of the West, and in particular in Japan. That influence and power extends to Japanese companies (such as Nintendo, Sega, CapCom, and Square Enix), Japanese visual styles (such as super-deformed characters and anime-like images), as well as an extensive list of games that have influenced successive generations of game designers around the world.

While game studies scholars are now starting to examine that influence, we are likewise seeing an increase in scholarly attention to other Japanese cultural products, including the keitai (mobile phone), anime, manga, and children's toys [1, 6, 14].

Books such as *Full Metal Apache; Personal, Portable, Pedestrian; Millennial Monsters; Plastic Culture* and endless volumes on anime all attempt to explain a "new" Western fascination with Japanese pop culture. A new research annual titled *Mechademia* has been launched by the University of Minnesota Press, which is devoted to studying anime, manga and other fan-arts. Popular books about specific Japanese game companies have been published (*Game Over*; *Revolutionaries at Sony*) as have more general books about the influence of Japan on the game industry (*Power up: How Japanese video games gave the world an extra life*).

Yet most of those books have a limited focus on recent popular culture products, and in particular media products, which suggests that popular or sustained interest in Japanese culture is a somewhat recent phenomenon. The examination of games, technology, movies and television shows implies, for example, that those were the first elements of Japanese culture to become popular in the West, or the first to achieve widespread recognition. And while Allison [1] does point to a longer history, such as the export from Japan of tin toys after the Second World War, such efforts are generally couched as isolated in their influence and limited in their ability to "transmit" aspects of Japanese culture abroad, for as Allison explains,

> "the influence of export greatly shaped the early designs of postwar toys. For example, Newsboy, a

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> doll made by Nikko Toys in the late 1940s with a celluloid head and a body built from tin cans, was clearly designed for an American audience. All the written script (on the package and the newspaper held in Newsboy's hand) was in English, and the doll's torso was draped in the Stars and Stripes" [1].

As she concludes, such early goods were designed so that their national origin or "flavor" could be "effaced or deleted when goods (particularly cultural goods) left the country" [1]. Koichi Iwabuchi has coined the term "cultural odor" to describe that element of "Japaneseness" which was often designed "out" of products intended for export [7]. He argues that a lack of such cultural odor was what led to the success of products such as the Sony Walkman, which conveyed ideas about sleekness and portability, and effaced references to its point of origin. Other cultural products, such as television shows and films, have had a more difficult time finding global popularity, due to their closer cultural connections to Japan, including use of the Japanese language, attention to Japanese holidays, and different genre conventions.

But particular cultural goods have always been designed, implicitly as well as explicitly, to leave their country of origin, whether to meet the demands of a particular foreign market, to find a larger audience, or in the service of the souvenir and tourist trades. However, other cultural products and practices were of course meant to remain, or perhaps move back and forth between Japan and other locales without losing any (or most) of their "essential Japaneseness."

If we refocus what we mean by "Japanese culture" beyond popular media culture, we find other avenues where cross-cultural encounters and exchanges have taken place. We can see, for example, that Japanese art has long exerted strong influences on Western art, and been a subject of fascination since well before the purported official opening of Japan to the West in the 1850s [12].

Such interest was even given a specific name--"Japonisme"—coined in 1872 "to designate a new field of study of artistic, historic, and ethnographic borrowings from the arts of Japan" [9]. That interest, particularly in areas such as ceramics, textile design, and furniture making, extended from Europe to the United States [9]. Even before a term was coined to understand or contain the phenomenon, practices arose in the West to try and imitate, if not copy, particularly expensive or rare forms of Japanese art. For example, popular attempts to imitate the expensive and beautiful lacquer ware products created in Japan led to the fad of "Japanning," which involved using imitation lacquer and was thought to be, in the late 1600s, "a fashion and a social accomplishment for a young lady" [9]. Such practices and interests help us see that the influence of Japan on the West has a much longer cultural history than recent media scholars suggest. And by ignoring that history, we not only exclude important parts of culture from analysis, we also bring to more recent cross-cultural encounters a notion that each culture is somehow free or pure from past influence.

This paper is one slice of a larger project, intended to lay out a few of the key concepts to be explored, as well as to provide a greater historical context for our understandings of the global games industry. The overarching question framing this study is "how have American and Japanese histories, cultures and contexts shaped the contemporary, global games industry?" While that question is too big to be answered in one paper, it does point to the scope of the project, and suggest that to better understand our global industry, we need to examine many histories and many contexts, both within the field of games as well as through disciplines that might not immediately seem relevant.

This project also grapples with some key theoretical understandings—namely Orientalism and hybridity. Edward Said's foundational work demonstrates the politicized, ideological ways that "East" and "West" are constituted within specific configurations of power, influence, and presumptions of dominance [10]. Yet, Said himself argued that Orientalism was likely a different experience for the United States than it was for Europe (and principally Britain and France), as the US primarily related to Japan and China (and did not colonize either), rather than India or Egypt. We can also question particular interpretations of the concept (or if it can be reworked at all) to game culture and the game industry, where traditional West-rest power relations are confused or altered.

Likewise, this project questions if hybridity could be a better theoretical entry point for understanding such interrelations. Typically used in relation to identity discussions, can the term and the concept describe an industry or a practice? What is gained or lost in such a move? Finally, are there other concepts that would better contain or explain what is happening in Japan and the United States in relation to games?

To reiterate, there's been a surge of interest lately in Japanese popular culture, both in its reception in other parts of Asia, as well as in the United States [1, 6, 7, 14]. While such work does provide a framework for understanding the appeal of popular culture products transnationally, it also couches that argument in a somewhat ahistorical manner. It also fails to address, in any depth, the centrality of digital games to that circulation. My interest in games is obvious, and that omission is my gain—as a central part of what Ito terms a 'media mix'—games are a central element of Japanese popular culture that enjoys worldwide circulation, and corresponding study [6].

Drawing from the world of art history, we find a long tradition of cross-cultural interests and cultural borrowings and appropriations that should be included in any examination of East-West exchange, in the study of popular culture. As Cohen argues in relation to the influence of Japanese and Chinese art in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “[a]sian aesthetics have affected American taste and the American conception of what constitutes art and beauty; they have influenced American architects, painters, and potters. Art is one part, one more piece of evidence for demonstrating that … the study of Western Civilization is not enough to explain American society” [3].

While perhaps not rivaling the commercial scale of popular cultural artifacts of the past decade, Japanese art found a ready audience in artists and art collectors from first Europe and then America, who all contributed to the success of Japonisme, “the late nineteenth century taste for exotic Japanese aesthetic properties” [16]. That fascination led to incorporations of various types—including the use of Japanese props (such as fans, kimonos and cherry blossoms) in paintings, the borrowing or adaptation of Japanese styles or motifs, and then finally, the dissemination of those markers into American art more generally. But what does that have to do with digital games?

I believe there are a couple of reasons this linkage (and study) is important. First, it demonstrates a continued cultural crossing or inter-weaving of Japanese and American cultural influences. Even though many of the artists most strongly affected by Japonisme were European, those artists were considered the dominant, most influential practitioners of their time—the Impressionists, for example, are still regarded as masters of color and light in painting. To explore how the aesthetics, artistic practices, and context of Japan played a role in their artwork also helps us understand Western culture and aesthetics. More close to home, American artists drew from those same sources, with similar results. How have those elements of culture carried over into American game design? How “American” is an American video game?

Second, the linkage is an articulation (in Hall’s sense), drawing together, conjoining, two separate areas of inquiry or artifacts, to demonstrate their connections [5]. Even during the time of Japan’s alleged isolation from the world, artists and merchants from the West traveled there to do business and gain inspiration. That led to cultural borrowings and appropriations on both sides. Events such as World Fairs and Expositions gave a wider audience to Japanese art and culture than the art world or traders. It suggests that the recent success of Japanese media products globally is not a historical anomaly, or a new phenomenon. While both periods of history draw from different types of culture—high culture and popular culture—they both demonstrate the hybridity that culture cannot escape. The “artistic nationalism” that Winther-Tamaki argues Japanese and American artists tried to preserve was never fully successful in maintaining clear boundaries for what was/is “Japanese” and what is/was “American” [16].

And finally, by exploring the evolution of two different forms of culture—one deemed “high” and one deemed “popular” (or even “low” by some critics)—this paper argues for their ultimate connection, as well as the problems with making such distinctions at all. Cultural studies seeks to explore why we make those distinctions, and how they are constructed to maintain particular forms or articulations of power. In drawing a connection between art and digital games, Japan and America, this paper explores that genealogy, and how it has been deployed in relation to discourses of Orientalism.

ART HISTORY, EAST MEETS WEST

In constructing a history for the popularization or spreading acceptance of Japanese art in the West, and in the United States in particular, certain themes or practices emerge. While at first most Japanese art was simply considered foreign, slowly, American art collectors and museum directors began to draw distinctions between various forms of art, and make judgments concerning its quality. For example, the popularity of Japanese porcelain (which began to be manufactured in the seventeenth century) in Europe led to a situation where “some pieces were especially made for the export trade, depicting Dutch merchant ships and brocaded ‘Japan’ patterns” [9]. The popularity of Japanese art did not abate over time. “The enormous demand in Europe and America for Japanese fans radically altered production methods. Mass-production techniques were brought in from the early 1860s when vast quantities of fans were exported in order to satisfy the ever-growing demand for ‘something Japanese’” [9].

With that growing influx to the West, more serious dealers and collectors as well as museum directors learned to take greater care in seeking out “serious” quality pieces of Japanese art, rather than the cheaper “export” models that were beginning to proliferate.

Yet, that popularity was not uncritical, or unshaped by the biases and particular interests of individuals with the authority to make purchases or influence the tastes of others. Thus the painter John La Farge “sincerely admired many of the Japanese art objects with which he came in contact, [but] he tended to favor small, intricate objects such as sword guards of refined miniature metalcraft. …[T]his focus on diminutive qualities of Japanese culture was often constituted as a gendered contrast with American masculinity” [16].

Along with collectors and dealers traveling to Japan, Japanese art began to appear in exhibitions and museums, in both regular and special collections as well as traveling shows based on particular themes. In 1876 at the Centennial Fair in Philadelphia, the Japanese government “devoted tremendous resources to stage an impressive show of Japanese arts and crafts for the first major introduction of

Japanese culture to the American public, and the response was enthusiastically positive." Certain museums became known for their extensive collections of Japanese art, including the Boston Museum of Fine Art (which collected over 17,000 works of art from Japan) and the Seattle Art Museum [16]. European and American painters traveled to Japan to learn about indigenous styles, as well as to incorporate motifs, styles and techniques, along with Japanese props, textiles and artifacts, into their own images. Exposure to Japanese arts spread, and the styles of that art were also diffusing into the work of more Western artists.

Such activities are never ideologically neutral, occurring with little thought or consideration. Art collectors and dealers deemed certain styles and forms of Japanese art "more sophisticated' and "more authentic" then other styles and forms, and thus certain artistic goods were more likely to be considered good or worthy. Japanese art began to be popularly associated with particular mediums (wood block painting, lacquer ware, fans), and particular styles (asymmetry, vertical rather than horizontal spaces). Art collectors as well as consumers were encouraged to develop tastes for particular styles and forms of art, to make distinctions and judgments. Thus key gatekeepers helped to give access to art as well as interpret that art, defining both what was available for critique as well as what the terms of that critique should be. Japanese art entered into circulation in American in a multitude of ways, none of which that could be deemed natural or inevitable.

From Art to Games

Compare that history of Japanese art to early Japanese videogames. After the industry crash of 1983, Nintendo was rightfully cautious in re-entering the North American market. It carefully screened all games made for its system, determining which would be accepted for production, and which would then be released in the West. Through its magazine *Nintendo Power*, it helped define for readers what a good game looked like, and how to judge or rate games. Nintendo carefully released only certain genres of games, and titles, based on what company executives thought a foreign market would find acceptable—not too strange, too foreign, too different [13].

Into the 1990s, Japanese games have become increasingly carefully localized, and while certain genres are readily accepted (RPGs, stealth games), others still have trouble with sales and dominant American opinions about what a digital game should be (horse racing, pachinko, board games). Japanese games aren't simply released in the United States, or England or Germany—they are localized, which includes a host of technical, cultural and social decisions and changes to be made. Again, this is a process that is not natural, nor is it inevitable.

Early American (and European) artists studied Japanese art and incorporated Japanese images and elements into their paintings/drawings/artifacts, and they also studied the forms, techniques and tools used by Japanese artists, in order to incorporate those forms and techniques, to greater and less degrees, into their own work. And now we can see American (and European) game designers attending the annual Game Developers Conference to see post-mortem panels and talks for popular Japanese games such as *Final Fantasy XII, Katamari Damacy,* and *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*. They do so to better learn about the forms, techniques and tools used in *those* productions. And again, that process goes both ways, with Japanese developers incorporating American styles and elements into their own games, furthering the hybridity of digital games.

However, while it is useful to draw attention to such wider histories and speculate as to their relevance, we must also keep in mind other power relations, and how they have been expressed both in the past, and in contemporary culture. In regards to any East-West relationship, questions of Orientalism, power and influence must be addressed.

ORIENTALISM AND GAME STUDIES

Although race has been a relatively unexplored topic in relation to videogames, at least as compared to gender, a few studies have explored the presence of Orientalist elements in digital games made in both Japan and the West. Christopher Douglas [4] critiqued *Civilization III* for its imperialist elements, finding in the game ideologies of domination and cultural strangeness while at the same time possibly containing a "subversive potential to challenge notions of Western supremacy." More recently, Schwartz examined representations of foreign cultures in four contemporary games, finding that in the game *Suikoden III,* for example, "game designers used othering as a narrative theme" which "emphasizes the natural tendency to define and fear the unfamiliar" [11].

Likewise, Tucker writes more broadly about Japanese videogame titles, arguing "Orientalism persists as the default framework through which gaming depicts Eastern cultures" [15]. That framework can be found, he believes, in both Western titles that depict 'strange and exotic' cultures such as the *Prince of Persia* series, as well as in games made by Japanese developers themselves, who are "internalizing and catering to the Western audience's fetish" and thus are "able to commodify their cool, and use the marketing power of their cultural archetypes in the capturing of the electronic gaming market" [15].

While such critiques and studies bring attention to potential otherings and problematic racial, ethnic and cultural representations and activities within games, I believe there are some problems with a simplistic use of terms such as "the other" and "exotic." Schwartz, for example, defines any opponent in the games she studied as "the other" without careful attention to defining the term or its use. When she discusses *Shenmue*, she writes that although the player takes on the role of a Japanese individual who must avenge the death of his father, he interacts with many Chinese characters who "are portrayed as exotic… not overly negative" [11].

She continues that while the depictions of the Chinese "are clearly different from the Japanese protagonist," "this othering is engaged by the player toward virtual inhabitants of the game world" [11]. This raises two questions—is "different" equatable with "othering," and is this "difference" necessarily bad, particularly since there is nothing "overly negative" about the depictions of the Chinese?

Similarly, Tucker paints all games that portray Japan and the East with the Orientalist brush, no matter their country of origin. While it is fair to say that countries and cultures can internalize particular images and beliefs about themselves that may not be positive, or can be reductive, that argument is too broadly cast to be helpful. Is Mario Orientalist? Is Link? Is there any qualitative difference between American and Japanese depictions of Japan in games? We need more careful attention to such details before we can make such broad based assertions.

However, my intent is not an extended critique of game studies' references to Orientalism in contemporary games. Rather, I wish to bring attention to some of the ways that the concept and term have been used, and to complicate that usage. So we may see images of samurai and ninjas in games, and representations of "different" cultures and ethnicities, but those events occur in a context that extends beyond a facile application of Orientalism. Part of that is historical—Japanese and American individuals, businesses and governments have interacted with one another in more complicated ways than the dominant/subordinate roles of European and Middle Eastern countries that Said details [10]. Before the Second World War, there was not a colonizer/colonized relationship like there was in many West/East relationships. After the war's conclusion, American occupation of Japan was a key formative event, yet led to economies and cultures tied closely together, on a mostly equal footing. And in the digital game industry, much of the power lies in Japanese conglomerates that do their own naming and controlling. We are also comfortable with pastiche and cultural borrowings, which may not imply any deep strangeness or hidden currents of meaning-instead simply evocative of a new style or expression, one anchored in visual elements disruptive of both realist and modernist tendencies.

Orientalism likewise suggests a projection of what we deny about ourselves onto an other, yet in the case of Japan and digital games, those others had already incorporated aspects of modernity when we first encountered them, including Western art techniques and ways of seeing. Further, contemporary Western interest in Japanese games and the game industry can include a certain element of exoticization, but it is also as likely to include understanding, reworking, and identification. For some gamers, Japanese games are a delightful escape from more "normal" Western games. For others, they are too strange to accept. For yet another group, they are a source of artistic inspiration, and for the American otaku, they may be a source of affiliation and identification with a larger group or subculture.

Lastly, how can we, or should we, define Japanese games? Such a range of titles could include any *Final Fantasy* or *Zelda* release, in addition to *Cooking Mama* and *Brain Age.* What of games like *MySims,* which is based on the American game *The Sims*, but is a reworked, localized version being created for the Japanese market? And with the extensive localization processes necessary for transnational games, is *Final Fantasy XII* a "Japanese" game, is one version of it thus, or is it something altogether different? Orientalism is a complicated concept when related to digital games, and it deserves a more careful analysis than a simplistic us/them reduction.

Orientalism as a concept or theoretical framework can serve us in useful ways, but only if it is properly conceptualized. Thus, the relationship between Japan and America is quite different from Said's Middle East and Europe. A traditional colonizer/colonized relationship does not apply, apart from a (relatively) brief period occupation following the Second World War. Additionally, we must recognize the power of Japan in the digital games industry, a power which is as much cultural as it is economic. So, some form of Orientalist framework or understanding might be helpful, but only if carefully delineated.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has served as a starting point for creating a more useful framework for understanding the relationship between Japanese and American culture—drawing from art history and the theory of Orientalism. What it has hopefully accomplished is a complication of our ideas concerning originary moments, both in relation to games, as well as in relation to cross-national encounters.

Likewise it has pointed to problems with simple applications of Orientalism as applied to an industry with cross-national influences very different from other media forms.

What is needed next is a more thorough exploration of encounters between Japanese and American art and artists, from the modern to the contemporary era. By further exploring that history, and linking it to the artistic and economic development of games transnationally, we can build a genealogy of the digital games industry that offers a better understanding of our digital games, our game players, and our cultures, across various oceans.

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*I focus on Japan and America based on their importance in the history of the digital games industry. However, there are certainly other key nations and regions that have contributed to that history, including Europe and other regions in Asia. Much of this analysis of America can also apply to the West more generally, but for this preliminary argument I wished to delimit my terms more specifically.

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